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Sap, J.W.

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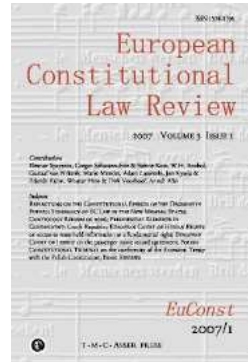
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The Castle, the Church and the Borough

John W. Sap

MARJORIE CHIBNALL, *The Normans* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing 2006) 191 p., ISBN 1405149655

'What is Europe?' is a question to which there are many different answers. Numerous citizens in Western Europe take it to mean the European Union, but the Council of Europe (which includes Russia and Turkey) is a much broader concept. One way of approaching the question of 'what is meant by Europe?' involves the political pronouncements that have been accepted by member states, and which have resulted in legal principles. However, this is a question that also can be answered on the basis of geographical concepts, or in religious, intellectual or cultural terms. We know that, two thousand years ago, Europe did not exist as a cultural or legal identity. There was only the *Imperium Romanum* with Roman law, Roman money, Roman roads, bridges and architecture, and Latin as the common language. The period following the collapse of the Old World and the birth of the Western part of the Roman Empire in the fifth century saw invasions by Goths, Teutons, Vandals, Franks, Angles and Saxons. These events can be claimed justifiably to mark the beginning of a mutual assimilation of the Romanic and Germanic cultures. This later gave rise to Western European culture, which was composed of elements derived from classical, Semitic and barbarian cultures. Accordingly, Western European culture was a complex mix from the outset. It is a culture that draws on Christianity, humanism and Enlightenment, but it also has a darker side involving feudal and authoritarian traditions, imperialism, colonialism, endless wars, and the torture of innocents. Those seeking a better understanding of this culture would be well advised to read this book by Marjorie Chibnall, Emeritus Fellow of Clare Hall, Cambridge and Fellow of the British Academy. It deals with the emergence of the Normans, with their characteristics as a group, and with their various achievements in war, culture, and civilization. *The Normans* is part of a series on 'The Peoples of Europe', which illustrates the identity of our multinational Europe. According to Marjorie Chibnall, the Normans were a product of history rather than a natural ethnic or regional group. In her book, she explores the basis for their belief that they were a distinct people, exam-

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ining the way in which they constructed their identity from a range of racial and cultural elements.

Looking back in time, the city of Rouen was a centre of trade within a network of Roman roads. It was at the heart of what was later to become Normandy. As the Roman Empire crumbled away and effective civil government disintegrated, it was the Church that took over and preserved the framework of Roman government during the subsequent centuries. Of particular significance is that the Franks were prepared to adopt the Latin language. In the Frankish kingdom, the Gallo-Roman Church was wealthy, influential, and a centre of culture. Its monasteries were centres of religion and learning. In terms of its military organization, however, the region was too weak to beat off the repeated Viking invasions. In 841, the invaders burned Rouen to the ground, and within ten years, they began to overwinter along the Seine. The twelfth century historian, Orderic Vitalis, defined 'Normans' as 'men of the North ... whose bold roughness had proved as deadly to their softer neighbours as the bitter wind to young flowers.' Surprisingly, these men of the sea, who had lived by raiding the shores of northwest Europe, decided to settle along the banks of the river Seine and to create this new homeland called 'Normandy'. Given that these men from the North were never more than a small minority of the population of Normandy, it is astonishing even more that the area became a centre of further expansion. The Normans conquered southern Italy, fought for lands in Spain and the Middle East, and played a major role in the Crusades. William of Normandy (1028-1087), known to the world as William the Conqueror, was the first Norman to become a king (in 1066). When offering up public prayers for divine protection, together with his entire army, he stressed that his claim to the throne had found favour not only with the Pope, but with God Himself. In his military activities, King William always made the fullest possible use of the Church (p. 44). This extended to the building of castles and to the appointment of strong individuals from his Norman forces as their guardians. Accordingly, at his coronation in Edward the Confessor's church at Westminster, on Christmas day 1066, he enjoyed the immense advantage of the Church's blessing. Having conquered England, William of Normandy introduced feudalism and destroyed the entire English aristocracy within a period of twenty years. He linked England to the continental system, and to church reform. When Lanfranc of Bec became Archbishop of Canterbury, he brought to England the reforming canons promulgated in Norman church councils.

Delving into the origin of the Scandinavian invaders, Chibnall explains that Norwegians tended to work in small groups, that they preferred to settle in sparsely populated areas, and that they rarely departed from the customs of their own country. The Danes, on the other hand, who represented the majority of the

settlers in Normandy, tended to operate in large bands. They were out for a common profit. Their chiefs maintained strict authority, which gave these bands an almost military level of cohesion. Chibnall stresses that the Normans were well disciplined and bound by army law. This strict authority was one of the secrets of their great military success. The Normans were a prime example of Machiavelli's assertion that laws could not be upheld without effective force of arms.

The first leader of these settlers was Rolf or Rollo. He was probably a Norwegian who, like many of his compatriots, had been driven to seek his fortune abroad as a result of a shortage of land at home. Rollo persuaded the French king, Charles the Simple (or the Pure), that the Vikings could be valuable allies. At some time between 911 and 918, King Charles ceded lands around the lower Seine to Rollo and his followers. Rollo undertook to defend the Seine against attack and promised not to invade any other Frankish lands. He also had to accept baptism (changing his official name to Robert), and to swear fealty to the king. Rollo decided to work with the king and the indigenous population. Having accepted their religion, he made serious efforts to restore the Church, including control of the bishoprics. This enabled later dukes to win favour with popes and other churchmen. The conversion of the Norman leaders from pagan Vikings to Christianity was of great importance. The continuity of worship helped to secure the loyalty of the indigenous peasantry to their new lords. This also provided the dukes with loyal practical support from bishops and abbots, and with praise in the chronicles of learned monks. These documents always portray the lives of the Dukes as being dominated by two themes, their success in war and their benefactions to the Church. The subsidiary theme involves the firm enforcement of just laws. While the dukes were described as ruthless, they never were seen as tyrants. When Rollo and his followers settled in Normandy, they adopted the Carolingian instruments of government rather than the Scandinavian popular assembly known as the 'thing' (p. 128). They accepted the existing structures of state. In England and southern Italy, they reinforced the strength of the monarchy. The Normans were excellent fighters, always training or hunting (which was just another form of training). According to Chibnall, there were no class barriers to a military career. Even Norman abbeys were actively involved in horse breeding, an essential part of Norman preparations for success in war. Chibnall shows that each territorial gain was regarded as a base of operations for future wars, to provide new patrimonies for younger sons. Thus, for the Norman people, war was almost a way of life. Yet, the Normans were equally noteworthy for the relative peace and order that they managed to establish in the emerging duchy.

Before he died, Rollo (or Robert) persuaded his principal followers to swear that they would accept his son, William Longsword, as his heir. William was a very devout adherent of the Christian Church. The title of 'Duke' was assumed by

the Norman counts of Rouen shortly after 987. At first, 'dux' had no administrative significance; indeed, Richard I was referred to as *dux pyratorum* (leader of the pirates). During Richard II's reign (996-1026), royal documents gave official sanction to the title 'Duke of the Normans'. Language was catching up with political reality. Even more so than his predecessors, Richard II built on Frankish institutions and adopted Frankish customs, yet without abandoning his Scandinavian inheritance. Although the Dukes had accepted the principle of monogamy, their illegitimate sons enjoyed almost total acceptance. Numerous marriages helped to stabilize relations with neighbouring rulers and to establish claims. The marriage of Emma, Duke Richard II's sister, to King Æthelred of England established a bond that provided Duke William with a claim to the throne of England by hereditary right. The children of all the leading families held most of the positions of power, including those in the Church. In the eleventh century, when they began writing their own history, the Normans represented the duchy as having been created virtually overnight, in the year 911. These written histories of the Norman people were a response to the invaders' need to be accepted as an integral part of the imperial world, first, by adopting the Latin language and the Christian faith, and then by claiming an ancestry equal in distinction to that of the Romans.

The Normans who settled in England were a dominant minority but, as in Normandy itself, they preserved useful institutions wherever they encountered them. By adopting many of the elements of the Old English state, they established a lasting rule. The new rulers of the kingdom of England were not the uncouth leaders of war bands, like Rollo. Instead, they were well-educated and experienced governors, with a strong duchy to back them up. The combination of castle, monastery and borough was the chief instrument of Norman colonization. It provided for an area's military and spiritual needs, while stimulating economic life and setting up a market for the surrounding rural settlements. King William also commissioned the drafting of the Domesday Book, which was a result of the Norman administration of law. Very gradually, the royal court modified and adapted the ancient laws and customs of England. Chibnall makes the point that 'A python may, by stretching its jaws, contrive to swallow a much larger prey; but England was too large for the Norman python. Even as a dominant minority, the Normans could assimilate the English people and their culture only by changing their own culture' (p. 109). Through intermarriage and a process of Anglicization, the Normans ultimately lost their own identity. They enjoyed power and wealth, while continuing to preserve the Norman myth. When Normandy was taken by the French King Philip Augustus in 1204, the Normans decided not to defend their lands in France. They had become Englishmen, and most cross-channel families had already divided up their estates by that time.

Although it was never really clear where the exact frontiers of their realm should be drawn, King William I and his aggressive barons felt the need to colonize Wales. They did so by establishing strong Marcher Lordships, and by introducing the familiar Norman pattern of using a castle, a priory or abbey, and a borough as focal points. The goal was to meld different peoples into a single nation and to extend ducal or royal protection through all levels of society.

Regrettably, Chibnall gives scant consideration to the Norman invasion of Ireland in 1170. Its leader, Richard FitzGilbert de Clare, the Earl of Strigoil, married the Irish princess Aiofe Mac Murrough, daughter of the King of Leinster. The importance of discussing the colonization of Ireland, which took place along typically Norman lines, is that Richard FitzGilbert's background – and the conflicts in which he became embroiled – would have provided greater insights into relations between the Norman barons and the monarchy. It would have been useful if Chibnall had pointed out that Richard FitzGilbert de Clare was directly related to Richard I, the former Duke of Normandy (933-996). This is because Richard was a direct descendent of Rollo, the Viking, a fact that would tend to support Chibnall's theory about the Norman myth.¹

In all fairness, Chibnall does present many fascinating facts about the knights from Normandy who participated in the conquest of southern Italy. The history of this venture dates back to around the year 999. Norman pilgrims on their way home from Jerusalem at that time happened to be in Salerno when it was raided by Saracens. The Normans saw that the town's citizenry made no attempt to oppose these raiders. Once back in Normandy, these pilgrims recounted stories of a country where good fighters could earn a lot of money. Soon, many Normans travelled south and the Saracens were driven off. These Norman knights formed into groups, each with its own leader, and made a living by plunder or by fighting as mercenaries in the armies of foreign princes. Eventually, they demanded land, settled it, and imposed Norman rule. Tancred de Hauteville held estates in Normandy, but these were insufficient to support his large family. However, he had trained his twelve sons well in the art of war, so well in fact that they were usually victorious in battle. Some of them became counts or dukes in southern Italy, where they helped to establish a Norman kingdom. They won power through their military prowess and their ability to enforce the law. They acquired nobility by appropriating estates and intermarrying with the local aristocracy.

Norman myth holds that King Roger II of Sicily was even seen as an instrument of God's will. It is therefore appropriate that the front cover of Chibnall's book is adorned with the image of a mosaic from St Mary's of the Admiral, Palermo, which depicts King Roger II being crowned by Christ himself! The descendents of

¹ Richard Roche, *The Norman invasion of Ireland* (Dublin, Anvil Books 1995).

the de Hautevilles continued to wield ultimate authority in the kingdom until the twelfth century. This was in spite of the region's cultural diversity and the fact that the active regional government was centralized at the King's court and palace in Palermo. According to Chibnall, they still exhibited some of the traditional Norman characteristics, such as living by the sword, military strength, the kinship network, and an ability to make use of the Church. Southern Italy served as a launch pad for further Norman expansion across the Mediterranean region (Malta, Crete). By the time Pope Urban II launched a crusade to capture the Holy Land, in 1095, the Normans had long been seen as the spearhead of counter-attacks against the Saracens. A highly trained fighting force capable of the most ghastly atrocities, the Normans happily took part in the crusade, believing that anyone who died in the service of Christianity would go straight to Heaven. In addition to establishing the Kingdom of Jerusalem, with its unique racial and cultural mix, the bands of adventurers from Normandy provided a network of personal contacts right across Europe. Benedictine abbeys established networks of dependencies. French, the *lingua franca* of the educated world, together with the Latin taught in schools, facilitated the free movement of educated Normans and many others. Various racial and cultural elements were brought together to create the Norman myth.

While hatching his own invasion plans, Napoleon studied the Bayeux Tapestry and declared the conquest of England in 1066 to be one of the most memorable deeds of the 'French nation'. However, given their Scandinavian origins, it is more appropriate to view the Normans as a 'European people'. So widespread was the Normans' influence and so well were their exploits chronicled, that western European culture in the eleventh and twelfth centuries cannot be properly understood without an appreciation of their world. The Normans of that period contributed to the laws and governmental structures of several modern nation states. They hold a lasting place in history and in folk memories. Their heritage is commemorated in such widely separated cities as Oslo, Copenhagen, Rouen, London, Dublin, Palermo, Rome, Naples and Jerusalem.

Following their assimilation into several different nations, the Norman people nevertheless became a significant common element of true value in the formation of a new European consciousness during the Middle Ages.

Chibnall leaves out some of the Normans' more unpleasant deeds, such as 'The Harrying of the North' when William the Conqueror destroyed an entire region of England. Furthermore, criminals received very short shrift indeed. The Normans also believed that painful punishments were the fairest, because if criminals are locked up in jail their innocent families might starve. Accordingly, they made a public display of the criminals themselves. Those found guilty of serious crimes would have their nose or a hand cut off, before being sent back to their families. Her omission of their infringements of human rights suggests that

Chibnall's love of the Normans outweighs any dislike that she might feel. What we can also learn from the Norman story is that while a borough's market is important for wealth creation, the market alone is not sufficient to mould a strong community. The success of the Norman people was based on a mix of private enterprise and careful governmental planning, including the military and spiritual aspects of law and order.

